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Mane Character

How the Unicorn Became Everything to Everyone

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Illustration by Zeke's Lunchbox

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Lisa Frank notebooks were ubiquitous accessories for girls growing up in the 1980s and '90s, especially those that featured bold, rainbow-colored unicorns splashed against a chaotic background. Frank's psychedelically wild work became iconic over time, and was the source of millennial nostalgia when the rainbow unicorn fad returned with a vengeance in the early 2010s. But as a cultural touchstone, the Lisa Frank unicorn connects to a much deeper legacy. The journey of the unicorn in Western mythology is a microcosm of society, a glimpse into how people view one another—and a particularly close illustration of how broader society thinks about women. While the word *unicorn*—derived from the Latin roots for "one" and "horn"—didn't enter the English lexicon until the 1200s, it is an ancient figure, appearing alongside the [ellin](), a similar one-horned beast from Eastern Asia, in the Indus Valley, Mesopotamia, and other cradles of civilization.

The Greeks were especially interested in the unicorn, but their fascination had an intriguing wrinkle: They thought unicorns were real. But descriptions from writers such as Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* (77 CE) bear little resemblance to the modern unicorn: "The body of a horse, the head of a stag, the feet of an elephant, the tail of a boar, and a single black horn three feet long in the middle of its forehead," with a "bellow" for a cry. These biological improbabilities were also reportedly fierce, an element of the mythology that was retained when the unicorn made the shift to medieval bestiaries, and took on elements familiar to modern readers. The unicorn morphed into a ferocious horse- or goat-like beast with a single horn, a wild creature that could only be tamed by a virgin. Two famous tapestries woven in the 1400s depict this in detail, with a long-haired, pale woman luring the beast to her lap, where it lays down its horn and surrenders. The crude symbolism of the horn in the virgin's lap doesn't go unnoticed, as Haruki Murakami observes in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985).

In many medieval texts, though, the virgin is likened to the Virgin Mary, and the narrative is a highly stylized version of *The Passion of the Christ*; note, for example, the spears used on the unicorn's flanks in the 15th-century "Hunting of the Unicorn" tapestry. It's obvious that the mythology around virgins is steeped in gender essentialism and sexism. There's a particularly grotesque example in the Harry Potter series in which unicorns will only interact with young girls, not boys or adults. The heavy-handed symbolism around boys—some as young as 11—as "impure" was both a reinforcement of the unicorn myth and a prelude to later revelations about J.K. Rowling's transphobia, which draws heavily on the idea that trans girls are dangerous because they're "men in dresses," and are inherently stained, deceptive. Even the unicorn's color plays deeply into these attitudes: Most are snow white, with flowing manes and tails, and horns that seem to glow. The deep and heavily racialized association with whiteness and purity in Western culture play out in everything from wedding dresses to the very language—white magic, a dark tale—used to differentiate between "good" and "bad." And while black unicorns exist in pop culture, they're frequently figures of terror and evil and carriers of ominous magic (or they're sexualized Black women with gross white men in their dating site inboxes).

Unicorns as a symbol of something pure and ethereal also began to meld with imagery of the animal as deeply lonely; they're not typically depicted in herds, and predominantly seem to live in isolation. Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* (1968), later adapted into a 1982 feature film, draws heavily on this evolution of the mythos. Tanith Lee's *Black Unicorn* (1991) wanders wild and dangerous in the desert before being tamed by, of course, an isolated young girl. In *Blade Runner* (1982), the infamous unicorn dream sequence shows the mythical beast running wild, free, and alone in police officer Rick Deckard's (Harrison Ford) mind, presenting a vision of a world far from the capitalism and suffering his character endures, tantalizing him, and the viewer, with something that can never be. The evolution of the unicorn as something far beyond a religious symbol became critical at the close of the 20th century, as the meaning of the word underwent a radical expansion; it became both a mythical creature and a concept, something unreal, impossible, and unattainable, something that possibly doesn't exist at all. The once-brisk trade in narwhal horns could no longer fool the average consumer.

The most famous recent example is likely in the tech industry, where venture capitalist Fireen Lee used the word in 2013 to describe real companies valued at more than $1 billion. Lee also dubbed companies valued at $100 billion or more, such as Facebook, "super unicorns." By 2021, the tech world had more than 600 unicorns, with many sharing traits Lee identified, including the lack of diversity among the founders, who tended—despite popular mythology about young up-and-comers—to be more experienced people in their 30s with established relationships with each other and the industry. The explosion of unicorns in the 2010s reshaped both the Bay Area, where many companies were based, and the nation as a whole; Facebook, for instance, had a profound impact on the 2016 election and fundamentally reshaped the way media is consumed with its pivot to video on the basis of falsified metrics, while the real estate gold rush created substantial pushout in the Bay Area. These unicorns were unreal and wild in the sense of their rarity, also being viewed as unbelievable strokes of good fortune for those who profited from them, and representing something for other companies to chase. This sort of unicorn ties itself around rainbow capitalism, the practice of pinkwashing products and corporations with LGBTQ iconography. Some companies are deliberately marketing to the community, while others are attempting to use it as a shield.

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For instance, an airline might brand itself with colorful rainbow flags without offering inclusive healthcare benefits. The rainbow unicorn, adopted as an icon by some members of the LGBTQ community—as early as 1997, a character in *Orgazmo* remarks, "I don't want to sound gay or nothing, but unicorns kick ass"—is turned to sinister service in the form of assimilation. In the 2020s, an era of performative diversity and inclusion activities, rainbow capitalism has become deeply entrenched in the way people do business—in a sense, one might say that these companies are luring LGBTQ people into a trap with their annual June efforts to perform support for LGBTQ people with one hand while engaging in harmful business practices with the other. As Congressperson Ayanna Pressley tweeted in June 2021, "Dear Corporations, thank you for your Pride tweets, packaging, and merch. Now how are you applying pressure to oppose hateful anti-trans bills in state legislatures across the country?" It's easy to apply a rainbow filter to a social media profile pic. It's harder to commit meaningful acts of solidarity with the community a company is attempting to monetize. The unicorn as something that likely doesn't exist despite the best wishes of some also cropped up in the form of the "hot bi babe," a mythical bisexual woman who's content to date a couple, but not on equal footing.

"The HBB is a toy, not a person, must be decorative, compliant, not mind when she's not a 'real' part of the marriage/relationship, service both partners, and help the wife act as entertainment for the male partner. Ew," a bisexual woman named Gwen told dominatrix Mistress Matisse for a column in *The Stranger*. It's unsurprising that such a person is predominantly a myth, as few women would be likely to consent to such an exploitative arrangement; Matisse notes that it's also unjust to both women. The choice of a mythical beast isn't an error: Couples want to catch something rare and unbelievable, but for some it's also rendered less threatening by its impossibility. The unicorn can be little more than a fantasy, an idea to toy with to spice up a flagging relationship. Ads for unicorns abound on dating services, with the term appearing as a tag as well, even though there are obvious power imbalances. "HBBs are not a plug-n-play device one can pick up at the local computer store." Red said in Matisse's column, speaking of how degrading unicorn chasing (or hunting) can feel. This doesn't stop people from sometimes aggressively pursuing bisexual women, assuming they're available for and interested in sex at all times. Bisexual women are generally surrounded by myths that they're promiscuous, easy, and therefore little more than sexual fetish objects; but in the case of unicorn chasing, they're something to be caught and tamed for the pleasure of others. Women and unicorns find themselves in a constant, inherent tension.

Women are pure virgins who still act as lures to trick unicorns to their doom, sexually voracious women willing to be used in sexually exploitative relationships, or they're symbols of capitalism upon which anything can be projected. And throughout, unicorns appear on an endless parade of merchandise targeting young women and girls. Lisa Frank was only one among many who sold the unicorn mythos to young girls in the 90s and 00s, and any trip to Target will furnish a cornucopia of unicorn gear for women and girls alike. A lamp in the shape of a unicorn head, for example, could go just as easily in a dorm room, a third grader's bedroom, or a millennial's "ironic" apartment, but it tends to be marketed specifically at women. The unicorn has powerful feminine associations, and has even become a source of reclamation and pride for some women, who may style themselves with rainbow "unicorn hair," apply unicorn makeup, drink beverages from unicorn cups while lounging on unicorn pool floats and ordering unicorn drinks from Starbucks—the next iteration of a specialty drink marketed to women and targeting them for mockery.

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The feminization of the unicorn, considered masculine through so much of history, forces it into the corner with other things deemed unimportant or unworthy of attention by nature of their association with women. By feminizing the unicorn, popular culture has also diminished and demeaned it. The association with young women and girls flies the horn away, turning the creature into something docile and unremarkable, so it's surprising that it's become associated with the highly masculine world of high-powered startups, until one digs deeper to note that many of these companies are plagued by inherent suspicion, questions about sustainability, and questions about who benefits from their overvalued status. While those on the ground floor may stand to reap their earnings, those who rush to capitalize on the allure of a company with bold promises may find themselves deceived. The threads of a familiar tale emerge again.

Colorful rainbow unicorn gear may be treated as frivolous, but the expansion from stickers and notebooks to wigs, costumes, clothing, furnishings, decor, and more represents substantial sales for the companies cashing in on the trend—and to pivot when mermaids came into fashion in the late 2010s. In the '90s, Frank's powerhouse company made $60 million a year—roughly $100 million in 2021 dollars. So the hunt for the unicorn has proved wildly successful for a handful of knights, and capitalism is clearly happy to continue pumping out products to satisfy a market of women, girls, and LGBTQ people, even as it simultaneously disdains them. It's fitting that the unicorn—a mythical, lonely misfit historically dismissed as something belonging to women—was adopted as an icon of the gay community: as Pride, unicorns parance through the streets with rainbow streamers, gilded horns on headbands sag down people's faces as the day goes on. Assuming respectability politics hasn't won, it may be possible to see someone in unicorn boots with a cascading tail attached to a butt plug. That reclamation embraces the very elements of the unicorn that society finds so easy to dismiss, a defiant gesture from a historically marginalized community that weaponizes the attitudes of society against it. Rainbow capitalism teaches us to be wary, for as Audre Lorde once said, the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.

We may not believe in the unicorn as a literal creature, but we do believe, powerfully, in the myth and symbolism of the animal as something deeply wild that we're always chasing, waiting for it to appear over the next fold of the horizon. When something doesn't truly exist, it's possible to project anything onto it, whether it's a multibillion-dollar company that exists to enrich its shareholders or an "ironic" rainbow unicorn outfit on the dance floor of a rave. The unicorn has strayed from Pliny's somewhat nightmarish description, while remaining an ever-elusive chimera, fierce and dangerous, tame and servile, beautiful and strange. Embedded within is a cautionary tale: What will you do with the unicorn, once you've caught it?

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